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Lyndon Johnson Is 10 Feet Tall

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WASHINGTON.

LIKE the old-time Texas cattle barons on their vast domains, Lyndon Baines Johnson seems to stand a good 20 feet tall in these parts. There is nothing in the capital that can look down on him except the Washington Monument.

The inevitable—and in this case, ironic—result of that is that everything at Mr. Johnson's feet looks smaller than it really is. In 18 months as President, he has made most of the institutions of Washington look like pygmies, and it is sometimes hard for the public to grasp that there is anyone in the Johnson Administration but a man named Johnson.

That is ironic because no President in decades has worked so hard to bring Congress into working partnership, because Mr. Johnson has passed out more operational authority to Cabinet members than, for instance, John F. Kennedy did, and because he places more reliance in some ways upon important advisers and staff members than many of his predecessors did. It is ironic, too, because of his unflagging efforts to bring both Government and private interests under "one great tent" of cooperation and consensus.

The Johnson formula of leadership does not, therefore, prescribe a one-man band. But the President's personality and force make it inevitable that everything he does is a star performance. He dominates any room by walking into it and any conference by taking his seat. "Power is," he once said, "where power goes"; and his Presidency has demonstrated that where his kind of power goes, so do all eyes. No matter what the formula, in this Administration it is Lyndon B. Johnson front and center, Lyndon B. Johnson speaking out, Lyndon B. Johnson getting the credit—and not infrequently the blame.

How the process of Johnsonizing the activities of this Administration works was never better illustrated than on one quiet Saturday morning at the White House in August of last year. Ranger 7 had just hit the moon, sending back 4,316 high-quality photos of a proposed lunar landing surface, and a selection of the pictures had been brought in for Mr. Johnson's contemplation—whereupon, the most accomplished pitchman in White House history rose to heights perhaps unequaled since P. T. Barnum first gazed upon the Siamese Twins.

First, the President ordered the showing to proceed in the Cabinet Room before an audience of reporters and photographers. Then he hitched his own chair so close to the movie screen that the photographers could not take pictures of it without taking his, too. When the showing was finished, Mr. Johnson wasted scarcely a moment in technical discussion of what he had seen. With an instinct as sure as the rocket's radio guidance, he put the occasion to work for him.

"Are you satisfied with the return on that investment?" Mr. Johnson demanded of Dr. Homer E. Newell, an associate administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

Dr. Newell said he was "delighted."

"Elated?" Mr. Johnson prompted.

"Elated," Dr. Newell conceded.

Did the Ranger "adventure," the President next inquired, leave any doubt whatsoever about the desirability of going to the moon (a project then under fire by such important critics as Barry M. Goldwater and Dwight D. Eisenhower)?

"Not in my mind, not at all," Dr. Newell was happy to say. "I would feel that we were backing down from a real challenge, the kind we've never backed down from before."

"So what?" Mr. Johnson said, none too patiently.

"We would lose leadership," Dr. Newell suggested.

"In the world?"

"In the world."

"Do you think we can be first in the world and second in space?" Mr. Johnson demanded expectantly.

"No, sir," Dr. Newell said, recoiling from the very idea.

All the while, of course, cameras were clicking and reporters were scribbling. Later, a NASA official said the President—not just Ranger 7—had made the biggest publicity breakthrough for the moon program since its inception.

AN achievement like the Ranger's can't be overshadowed entirely even by a President. The prime victim in this case was Dr. Newell. Answering the Johnson catechism like a schoolboy, he could hardly be recognized as the able scientist and important administrator that he is.

Mr. Johnson's constant overshadowing of all the men and works of his Administration results to a great extent from his real and direct personal involvement. Nowhere is this more true than in his conduct of foreign policy—and never was the impact of his own judgment and personality greater than in his quick and forceful intervention in the Dominican Republic's chaotic affairs. Not even the second most powerful man in the Johnson Administration, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, seems to have had much to say about that.

How much was Mr. Johnson's decision to send 400 marines to Santo Domingo (on Wednesday, April 28) based on a desire to save American lives, and how much on intelligence reports that a Communist take-over threatened the Dominican Republic?

"Only Lyndon Johnson could tell you that," one of his most influential assistants says. "Undoubtedly, there was some of one and some of the other. But

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that decision was made right in the President's head. Nobody else could tell you exactly why he made it."

But it was not merely the basic choice that was the President's. Informed persons report that it also was his personal judgment that set the Marines on the move before the Organization of American States was informed. Once he had decided to act, Mr. Johnson wanted nothing to delay the movement — as debate in the O.A.S. might have done. For the sake of acting in time, he chose to sacrifice hemispheric goodwill and risk the charge of international illegality.

WHEN the matter was carried to the O.A.S. the next day and that body decided to adjourn for a full day after meeting until 2 A.M. on Friday, April 30, Mr. Johnson angrily ordered Ellsworth Bunker, the American Ambassador, to get the organization back in session on Friday. He couldn't dominate the entire O.A.S. to that extent—but that night on national television he lectured the inter-American body as if it were the White House staff. "Loss of time may mean that it's too late to preserve the freedom which alone can lead to the establishment of true democracy," he said. "The eyes of the hemisphere are now on the O.A.S." The next day he got the action he wanted.

Mr. Johnson has consulted and listened a great deal more in the long agony of the Vietnam crisis than he did during the hurried Dominican intervention. Still, almost no facet of Vietnamese policy escapes his personal direction.

"I'd like to have a Scotch and water right now," he told a recent late-evening visitor. "But I can't. I've got planes out tonight."

Mr. Johnson knows when the planes are going, sometimes decides when they won't, approves—and often disapproves—target choices, and expects to be awakened when a mission has been completed. If pilots are missing, he usually stays awake until word of their fate has been received.

It has been primarily the President's strong resistance that has stopped the military from taking the potentially dangerous step of bombing Hanoi, or the embryonic Soviet missile installations in its vicinity. Last summer, as the Vietnam crisis became more intense, Mr. Johnson personally ordered [illegible] retaliation. North Vietnamese gunboats attacked American vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin. But when there appeared to have been a second naval attack, he personally prevented another retaliation; he wasn't sure enough that the "attack" actually had occurred.

"Hell," he has remarked, "I think we might have fired at a whale."

Mr. Johnson it was who ordered aides into a White House room, not to emerge until they had produced an economic-aid plan for Southeast Asia. The billion-dollar program announced in a speech at Baltimore was the result. In the same speech, the President offered to enter "unconditional discussions" on the Vietnamese situation. That, too, was a personal Johnson initiative.

Government is too complicated, of course, for even Lyndon Johnson always to get his way. For instance, as early as Thursday, April 29, the day after the Marines had entered Santo Domingo, Mr. Johnson wanted to say publicly that Communists were taking over the rebellion. The Administration was divided on the matter and he was dissuaded. He finally spoke out on Sunday night—and still believes he lost something of the initiative in swinging public opinion behind his policy.

On the other hand, when the State Department objected to sending John Bartlow Martin to the Dominican Republic as a personal representative of Mr. Johnson, the President directly overruled the diplomats and sent Mr. Martin anyway.

Again, when Mr. Johnson wanted some American agents in rural areas of the Dominican Republic to check on the possibility of Communist guerrilla action, he found numerous excuses and difficulties in his way. Finally, he called Adm. William F. Raborn, the new head of the Central Intelligence Agency, and got action, with approximately the following words:

"After I tell you this, I don't want to hear anything but the click of the telephone. I want 75 of your people in the countryside down there today. And if you need a submarine to get 'em in, we'll get you one."

But even such painful (for subordinates) attention to detail is only part of the explanation of the remarkable manner in which Mr. Johnson looms over his Administration. Another reason lies in the Western nature of the man—the breezy, two-fisted, overpowering range king who rules from horizon to horizon and from can-see to can't-see with iron will and fast gun. Lyndon Johnson, in fact, may be the best John Wayne part ever written.

One need only recall the Democratic National Convention of 1964. His own nomination was a sure thing, but Mr. Johnson still left nothing to chance or imagination. An aide backstage controlled the length of ovations following the utterance of the magic name; a Johnson portrait bigger than a Texas sunset glowered down on the submissive delegates, and the President shattered political precedent but held to the Western tradition by arriving in the nick of time to save the convention from total boredom. Charging to the rostrum like a troop of cavalry, he virtually placed his own choice in nomination for Vice President.

Never before, moreover, had a Presidential candidate so openly proclaimed his absolute right to choose his Vice-Presidential running mate. And having staked his lordly claim, Mr. Johnson turned the whole matter into a six-month chase scene, with bit players biting the dust every week. There was even a final showdown at the White House, before Mr. Johnson emerged with the man he had chosen to ride the river with—plain old Hubert Humphrey.

IT was a great show—and one in which the national convention of a great party was reduced to the dignity of one of Mr. Johnson's sheep herds on the LBJ Ranch, and the able and respected Mr. Humphrey was fixed at once in the role he sometimes still seems to play: loyal sidekick and humble friend—Chill Wills to John Wayne.

Now, in fact, all national conventions of a party already in possesssion of the White House are likely to be routine, managed, sheeplike affairs; virtually every Presidential candidate has handpicked his own running mate, and Hubert Humphrey is an important and influential figure in this Administration — already having made significant contributions in such fields as civil rights and foreign aid.

But all that is hard to see in the giant shadow of Lyndon Johnson. The President's range-bossing recently made his Cabinet look a little ridiculous, too. He let it be known that the members would hold a mass news conference after a meeting, and reporters flocked in for what they thought would be substantial news developments.

They were no sooner in the Cabinet Room than Mr. Johnson stalked out with key foreign-policy advisers. His absence utterly deflated the occasion. It also left Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman to discourse on the eradication of the screwworm, and other important figures to relate equally stunning news. Reporters emerged with the collective impression that if Johnsonian Cabinet meetings concerned no more than they had heard, the Rotary Club was more impressive.

Yet Mr. Johnson does rely on his department and agency heads. He has no sub-Presidents between himself and them, and Cabinet members have much autonomy in operating their offices.

But such facts are eclipsed by Mr. Johnson's presence—a presence further enlarged by his great political virtuosity. In the first place, he has put together a domestic program of such wide appeal that powerful voices of criticism are virtually nonexistent. It is as if the strident domestic quarrels of the Kennedy era never existed. Congressional and business opposition is muted at worst and only a strange combination of ardent segregationists and militant integrationists seems to dissent from the Johnsonian consensus.

Thus, with no one around to cry that the king has no clothes on, Lyndon Johnson seems all the more kinglike. He knows just how to take advantage of the situation. He marshaled his liberal Congressional majorities expertly, for instance, in one of the most popular liberal causes and rammed the education bill through both houses virtually without change—a tough strategy designed to preclude the possibility of a renewal of the old religious and racial controversies that had blocked all past school-aid measures.

When the results seem sure, Mr. Johnson has no objection to letting others share the credit. He virtually turned Medicare over to the powerful chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Representative Wilbur D. Mills of Arkansas. Mr. Mills, who had blocked the measure for years, knew the temper of Congress made it advisable for him to act in 1965. When Mr. Johnson let him write his own bill, he quickly seized the opportunity to become the champion of Medicare.

MR. JOHNSON has encountered strident criticism on Vietnam and the Dominican Republic. But Washington seldom has seen better political timing or shrewder leadership maneuvers than, first, the Congressional resolution of support on Vietnam, presented in the wake of the Gulf of Tonkin crisis when there was no alternative but to give it overwhelming support; and, second, the special appropriation for Vietnam, presented just at the moment of greatest unrest following the Caribbean intervention. Again, there was little choice for a restive Congress but to support the President at a time of crisis abroad.

All this was astute politics, not magic. In fact, no President ever has courted a Congress more ardently than Lyndon Johnson, consulted with its leaders so often, or touched base so widely and frequently with the entire membership.

But the net result is that Mr. Johnson is generally regarded as a "wizard" who exerts some magic on a "rubber-stamp" Congress and therefore rules that proud body about as imperiously as he does his own staff. The absence of real criticism, the President's enduring political reputation and the record of an able legislative body only make Congress seem another pygmy at his feet.

The White House entourage —Mr. Johnson's staff and the ubiquitous press—do not rise much higher in his shade. Douglass Cater, a journalist-turned-aide, put his finger on the reason in a speech at Washington and Lee University.

"He has this inherent resistance," Mr. Cater said, "to letting other people impose their priorities on him. It may be more convenient for the reporter if he knows what time the press conference is, but it may be less convenient for the President. And this same quality works in his dealing with Congress and the meetings around town. And I would submit that by this avoidance of commitments, by the avoidance of fixed routines of government, a President is able better to keep on top of a job that, if he submits himself to routines, can quickly become so burdensome, so time consuming, that he himself can never apply any new initiatives to the job."

Reporters may not like loping sheepishly around the White House drive in the President's wake, when they are accustomed to orderly, regularly scheduled news conferences; they may not like moment's-notice trips to Texas when they are accustomed to more thoughtful treatment, and staff members can scarcely be ecstatic over what Mr. Cater said was often a "20-hour workday."

Mr. Johnson is nonetheless determined to go his own way, believing that if he can do so on relatively small matters, it will follow that he can do so in the large.

Even so, he spends incalculable hours persuading and exhorting the press, and his staff has earned the general respect of those who deal with it. But the image of reporters struggling to keep up with his long stride, or watching the President ride away grandly from a news conference on a horse; the reports of Mr. Johnson's sudden shifts of plans, chaotic hours and whip-cracking ways—these are what persist, and two more pygmies, press and staff, are imagined at the feet of the colossus.

ALL these elements—close involvement in detail, galloping Western manner, fast political footwork, a determination to follow his own priorities—rise to a Tchaikovskian climax, only to be joined by the most peculiarly Johnsonian theme of all in the President's overpowering public presentation of his programs, thoughts and beliefs.

That theme is hard to define. At one moment, it seems to be evangelism — a compulsion to bring sinners to the true belief. At another, it seems a compulsive need for love and approval—an unwillingness to let a single critic go unanswered, one challenge unmet. Yet again, it appears to be a yearning to prove himself universal—to be the intellectual's President as well as the common man's, the genius of foreign affairs as well as the wizard of politics, the tough leader as well as the compassionate friend.

Or perhaps it is all the same —a rage for love, respect, approval, support, success. In any case, it is the final element in Lyndon Johnson's giant stance. He is constantly in what Theodore Roosevelt called "the bully pulpit." Preaching, arguing, writing, pleading, complaining, or just chatting, he is always coming on.

IN the first four days of the Dominican intervention, he was on national television three times. A hasty convocation of Congressmen in the White House got another long speech on the same subject and on Vietnam—and Congress got a formal message to go with it. A startled A.F.L.-C.I.O. meeting in Washington looked up to find the President, on the rostrum, talking foreign policy. And on the 20th anniversary of V-E Day, he was back on national television, reiterating major policy lines of the kind usually left to careful, stodgy State Department documents. That time, even millions of Europeans heard him, via the Early Bird satellite.

In the same general period, from a Wednesday to the next Tuesday, he took long, chatty walks with the White House press every day but Sunday. The first three lasted more than two hours each; on Saturday, a briefer walk was adjourned to the "Truman balcony" for more lengthy talk that aides tried unsuccessfully to end several times. And on a day not long before that, the President had seen four reporters for separate private interviews, in several instances lasting more than two hours each.

For the major speech on Vietnam in Baltimore, three of the top figures in the Administration—Mr. McNamara, McGeorge Bundy and George Ball —appeared on a prior television show, plugging the President's speech, almost like paid announcers saying: "Tune in tomorrow night and see foreign policy made."

For one unscheduled television appearance, David Brinkley interrupted a news program to tell his audience that Mr. Johnson was about to leap onto their screens with a speech. Then Mr. Brinkley, alerted by unseen presences, did a double take. "Well, I guess he isn't," he confided to his audience of millions. But a half-hour or so later, there was the President after all, interrupting another program to urge the O.A.S. to get moving.

Mr. Johnson's frenetic television pace gave rise to one mishap that only Washington viewers saw. Following his dramatic announcement that the Marines were being sent to Santo Domingo, the President was scheduled to make a routine announcement concerning Social Security. This was not to be televised live, but taped for use as the networks might see fit on later news broadcasts. The Washington television outlet did not get the word. So as soon as Mr. Johnson had finished telling the city about military action in the Caribbean, viewers here saw him move right into a fireside chat about Social Security. Nobody else in the country saw it, but to some in the capital it appeared that the President equated one announcement with the other.

These frequent and sometimes hasty appearances on television may be one reason why Mr. Johnson's foreign-policy decisions themselves are widely considered hasty and improvised. They certainly contribute to the impression that his is a one-man show.

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THESE speeches have their own peculiarly personal touches—frequent use of the first person singular, for instance, mingled with lapses into the royal "we." Viewers heard him chattily disclose how "I was sitting in my little office" when the cables came in that determined him on the Dominican intervention.

"We don't propose to sit here in our rocking chair with our hands folded" and let Communists take over Western Hemisphere governments, he told the interrupted labor meeting. That kind of homey Johnson language constantly shatters the pallid jargon of diplomacy.

The President frequently makes news announcements that in any other Administration would have been the province of his press secretary, or lesser public-information officers. Twice now, he has used national television to present coveys of quivering new appointees, with the pride of a general reviewing troops. Inevitably, the President, not the new recruits, was the central figure.

The night Lyndon Johnson came to the White House, he first called important Cabinet members and security officials around him. He next got in touch with Congressional leaders. Then he got on the telephone to numerous leaders of business and political opinion, all around the country.

That pattern of careful consultation and wide-ranging reach for support represents, in many ways, the true Lyndon Johnson. But who can forget him, during his campaign, roaring through a bullhorn to startled street crowds: "Come on down to the speakin' tonight!"

That is the message that comes through loudest and that is why Lyndon Johnson seems 20 feet tall—when he really measures no more than 10.